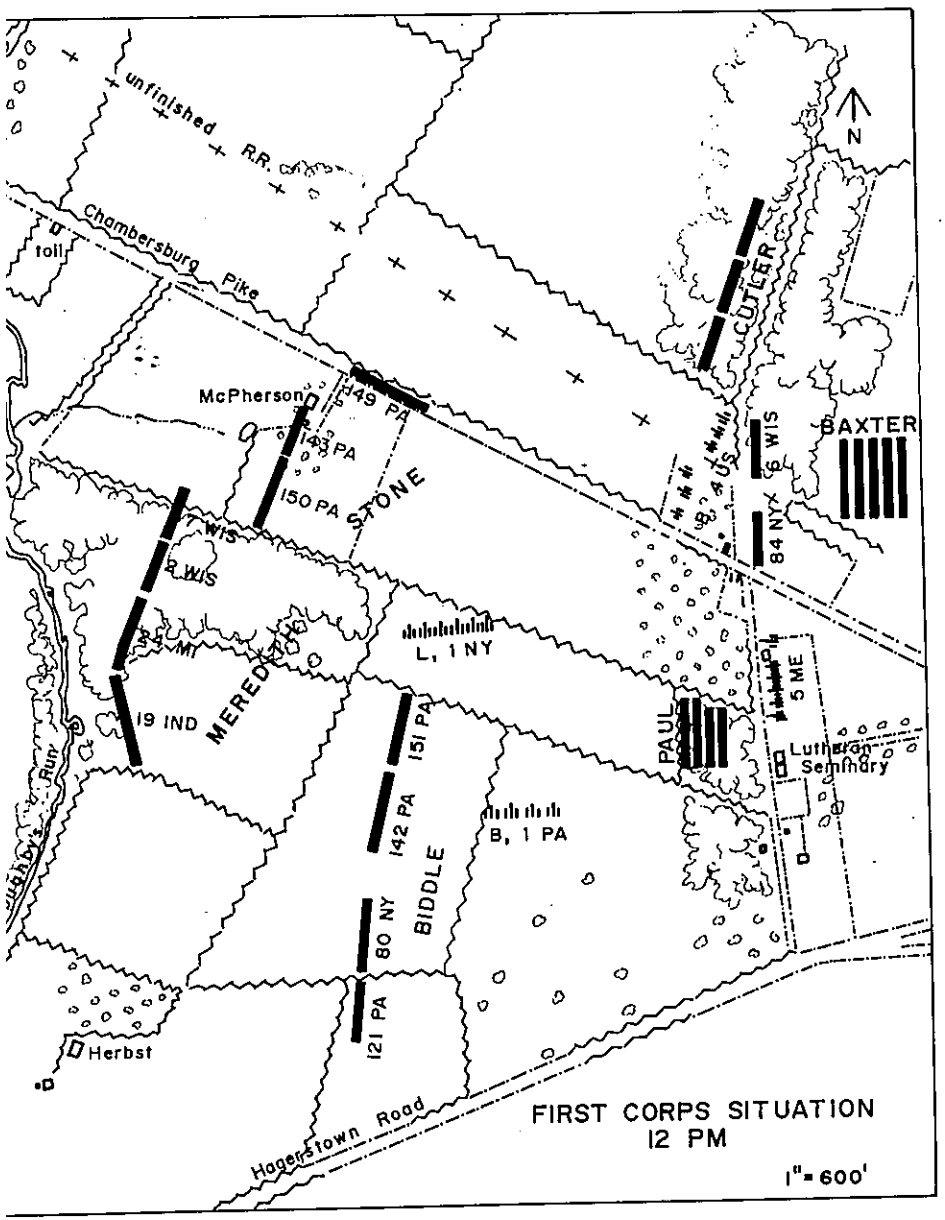
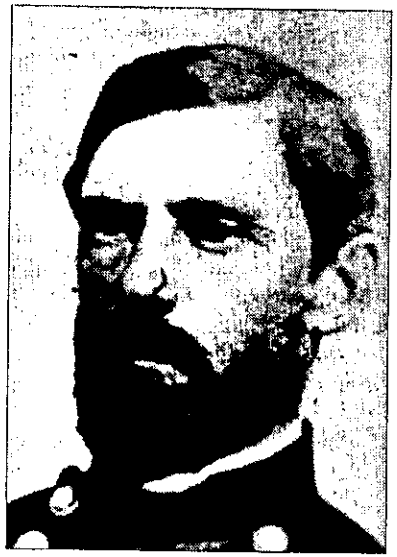


First Corps

(12,222 men / 28 guns)

Major General John Fulton Reynolds



By the summer of 1863, John Reynolds, commander of the First Corps, was among the most respected men in the Army of the Potomac; not one negative comment about him from his contemporaries is recorded. After the Union debacle at Chancellorsville in May, President Lincoln, aware of the fact that Reynolds was the one universally admired major general his Eastern army possessed, invited him to the White House for a conference. What happened in the meeting was never recorded, but it is believed that Lincoln offered command of the army to Reynolds. Reynolds supposedly replied that he would accept this post only if he was promised a free hand in running the army and was shielded from the political interference that had plagued his predecessors. Lincoln was unable meet his terms. Reynolds thus returned to the head of the First Corps, and three weeks later, just before the crucial clash in Pennsylvania, command of the army was thrust on Maj. Gen. George Meade. When Reynolds heard the news, he put on his dress uniform and made a formal visit to the new army commander, who was wearing an old field-worn uniform and muddy boots. Meade rose to greet Reynolds, and began groping for words to express his discomfort at the awkward situation of being promoted over the man who had the day before been his superior. Reynolds gently stopped Meade and assured him that the job had gone to the right man.

Both meetings illustrate the respect John Reynolds had earned from his peers. "General Reynolds obeys orders literally himself, and expects all under him to do the same," wrote First Corps chief of artillery Col. Charles Wainwright. Maj. Gen. George McClellan had called him "remarkably brave and intelligent, an honest, true gentleman." Lt. Frank Haskell, Brig. Gen. John Gibbon's observant aide-de-camp, called Reynolds "one of the soldier generals of the army, a man whose soul was in his country's work." Admiration for him thus derived in part from his direct and unpretentious—even Spartan—manner. But he possessed other natural gifts as well. A handsome man of forty-two, Reynolds was a picture-perfect general in uniform—six feet tall, narrow-waisted, erect, with dark hair and eyes, beard neatly groomed, and a deep tan gained from years of outdoor life. He was magnificent to watch as he rode the battlefield, rated by consensus as one of the army's best horsemen.

Like many of the other corps commanders, Reynolds was considered a conservative Democrat of the McClellan mold, which made him suspect in the eyes of the radical members of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. Senator Benjamin Wade, the chairman of the Joint Committee, had even declared that he wanted Reynolds removed from the army. But Reynolds was a quiet man about his politics, just as he was quiet about most everything else. This reserve regarding political matters disappointed some officers. "General Reynolds is very different from

[Maj. Gen. Jose oker," wrote one colonel, "in that he never expresses an opinion about other officers. . .I can get nothing out of him." It was his silence on matters regarding politics that made Reynolds untouchable to men like Wade.

Reynolds, a native of Lancaster, Pennsylvania (located fifty miles from the Gettysburg battlefield), received his early schooling in a nearby Moravian village. He attended the Lancaster County Academy and eventually found himself at West Point, where he graduated 26th among the 52 cadets of the class of 1841. Assigned to the artillery, he served for the next eighteen years against the Seminoles, in the Mexican War (where he was cited for bravery at Monterrey and Buena Vista), on the frontier, and in the Mormon Expedition in the late 1850s. In 1860, he was brought east and made Commandant of Cadets at West Point, where he also served as instructor of artillery, cavalry, and infantry tactics.

Reynolds' Civil War career is remarkable in that he was highly regarded despite a record with so few battlefield accomplishments. In August 1861 he was made brigadier general of volunteers and assigned to a brigade of the Pennsylvania Reserve Division, an "overflow" division of three brigades formed when Pennsylvania volunteers enlisted in numbers greater than the quota Lincoln initially requested. His brigade trained in the defenses of Washington until the following spring, when the Pennsylvania Reserves marched south to Fredericksburg as part of Maj. Gen. Irvin McDowell's First Corps, while the bulk of the Army of the Potomac fought with McClellan on the Peninsula. On June 10, 1862, McClellan persuaded Lincoln to release the Pennsylvania Reserve Division to him for the expected fighting around Richmond, and Reynolds' brigade was thus present for the Seven Days' Battles in late June.

Reynolds' Pennsylvanians first came under fire at Mechanicsville. They performed quite well and repulsed Maj. Gen. A. P. Hill's Light Division, a feat that earned Reynolds a post-battle commendation from Brig. Gen. George McCall. After the Battle of Gaines' Mill the next day, however, Reynolds—exhausted after two days of continuous fighting—fell asleep and was overlooked in the army's retreat. It was a bad time to take nap. Reynolds was shaken awake by Rebel pickets the next morning, and he spent the next six weeks in Richmond's Libby Prison, mortified at being captured in such an ignominious manner.

Exchanged in early August, he returned to the Pennsylvania Reserves, and this time was assigned to command the entire division, since McCall had himself been captured only two days after Reynolds. Reynolds' Division joined Maj. Gen. John Pope's Army of Virginia in time for the Battle of Second Bull Run, where Reynolds' performance stood out—especially when compared against the plethora of miserable Federal efforts on that field. On the evening of the second day of the battle, when the Federal left had been crushed and Pope's entire army was fleeing the field, Reynolds marched his brigades onto Henry Hill for a last-ditch stand. He grabbed the flag of the 2nd Reserves regiment, waved it and yelled, "Now boys, give them the steel, charge bayonets, double quick!" Reynolds' counter-attack stalled the Rebel advance and gained precious moments for the Union cause. He reformed his lines, clutched the banner of the 6th Reserves by its bullet-splintered staff, and rode the length of his line waving the flag overhead. His actions, said one of his awed men, "infus[ing] into the men a spirit anything else than one to run." Pope's retreating army owed its survival in large measure to Reynolds' powers of inspiration.

In the ensuing raid of Maryland by Robert E. Lee's victorious army, Pennsylvania governor Andrew Curtin, frantic in the belief that his state was about to be invaded, called out the local militia forces and pulled every string he had in Washington to obtain Reynolds as their commander. Both McClellan and Hooker complained that "a scared governor ought not to be permitted to destroy the usefulness of an entire division." Curtin prevailed, however, and Reynolds spent two weeks in Pennsylvania drilling old men and farm boys while the soldiers of his Reserve Division fought and died at the Battle of Antietam under the command of George G. Meade.

When he returned to the army at the end of September, Reynolds was promoted to the head of the First Corps (Joseph Hooker having been moved up to lead one of the "Grand Divisions created by Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside—the new commander of the Army of the Potomac.) At the December 13 Battle of Fredericksburg , it was Reynolds' old Pennsylvania Reserve Division—still led by Meade—that succeeded in making the only break in the Confederate line. However, Meade's men were unsupported by Reynolds' remaining two divisions, a failure most likely due to the fact that Reynolds' superiors, Maj. Gens. William Franklin and Ambrose Burnside, did not give the Pennsylvanian a clear idea of how his attack should proceed.

The Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863 was the culmination of a week of high frustration for Reynolds. Originally posted on the extreme left flank of the Union army, Reynolds' First Corps had made several bridgeheads across the Rappahannock River when it was recalled and marched nearly twenty miles to the opposite end of the Federal line. Faulty communications slowed his countermarch. The delay left the Eleventh Corps, which was guarding the army's extreme right, unsupported and with its own right flank "in the air." The Eleventh Corps' was attacked end-on and nearly destroyed by Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's Corps, a success which set in motion a series of setbacks that drained army commander Hooker's desire for offensive action. Once Reynolds' corps was finally in place, Hooker took a vote among the corps commanders on how to proceed with the battle. Reynolds, Meade, and Maj. Gen. Oliver Howard voted for advancing against the Rebels. Maj. Gens. Darius Couch and Daniel Sickles voted to retreat. Even though the vote was three to two favoring attack, Hooker decided to pull out and forfeit the battle. Leaving the meeting, Reynolds muttered loud enough for Hooker to hear, "What was the use of calling us together at this time of night when he intended to retreat anyhow?" Reynolds' 17,000-man corps was not engaged at Chancellorsville and suffered less than 300 casualties in the entire campaign. The disgusted Reynolds joined a chorus of voices urging Hooker's removal, which finally came about on June 28, just three days before Gettysburg.

It can be argued that John Reynolds achieved universal respect only by virtue of being the best of the mediocre cast of corps commanders in the Army of the Potomac. More likely, however, he had never really had a chance to show what he could do. By this third summer of the war, Reynolds had been in corps command longer than any other officer in the army.

As he rode toward the familiar landscape of Pennsylvania at the end of June, Reynolds wore a gold ring in the shape of two clasped hands on a chain about his neck. Engraved inside this treasured keepsake was the inscription "Dear Kate." Four years previously he had met Katherine "Kate" Hewitt as he returned from an assignment on the West Coast. If time permitted within the next few weeks, they had hoped to have a reunion in Philadelphia, so Kate could meet his family. The two planned to marry as soon as the war ended.

GETTYSBURG: For the final approach to Lee's army, Reynolds was entrusted by General George Meade with the advanced (left) wing of the Army of the Potomac—comprised of the First, Third, and Eleventh Corps. On July 1, riding north toward Gettysburg with Brig. Gen. James Wadsworth at the head of his First Division, Reynolds heard the boom of artillery ahead and received word from cavalryman Brig. Gen. John Buford of an enemy advance on the town along the Chambersburg Pike. He galloped toward the sounds of combat with his staff and, at a little after 10:00 a.m., found Buford's men doggedly slowing the Rebel advance toward McPherson's Ridge. Commending Buford on his choice of ground, Reynolds sent a message urging Howard to hurry the Eleventh Corps forward, and informed Meade that he would fight the Confederates " inch by inch, and if driven into the town I will barricade the streets and hold them as long as possible."

Having thus gone a long way toward choosing the ground over which the developing battle would be fought, he rode back to wait for Wadsworth's column. When Brig. Gen. Lysander Cutler's brigade arrived with Capt. James Hall's 2nd Maine Battery, Reynolds hurried them at the "double-quick" across

the fie[illegible]est of town to McPherson's Ridge, where Buford's cavalry had just started to give way before the attack of the brigades of Brig. Gens. James Archer and Joseph Davis.

After deploying Hall's battery and the regiments of Cutler's brigade, Reynolds hurried back to guide the Iron Brigade to the front. Alarmed at the headway Archer's Confederates were making south of the Chambersburg Pike, Reynolds exhorted the 2nd Wisconsin, the Iron Brigade's lead regiment, to hurry forward and meet the Confederates head on, shouting "Forward men, forward for God's sake and drive those fellows out of those woods." As the mid-westerners ran up the slope loading their muskets in the face of Archer's opening volleys, Reynolds rode at their rear. He turned in his saddle to look for supports, and was hit behind the right ear by a musket ball. He swayed in the saddle before falling to the ground, dying in the arms of his staff a few moments later.

With only a fraction of his corps available, the Pennsylvania general had placed himself at the head of his troops confronting an enemy of unknown size. Dedicated to an aggressive forward defense in the vanguard of the entire Army of the Potomac, Reynolds, at the cost of his own life, had blunted the Rebel thrust and bought valuable time that permitted the balance of Meade's army to take possession of the coveted high ground southeast of Gettysburg.

For further reading:

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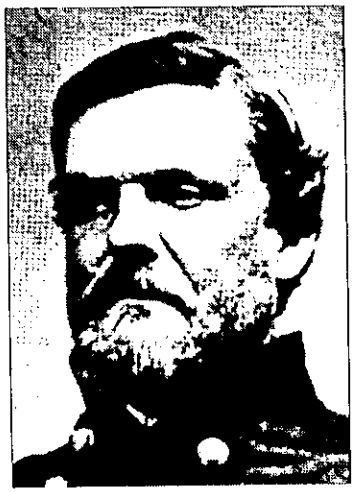
Major General John Newton



Forty-year-old John Newton was the newest of the eight Union corps commanders present for duty on July 2. He had, in fact, been named to his post by Major General Meade only the night before, following Maj. Gen. John Reynolds' untimely death during the opening hours of the first day's fighting. Newton had no experience leading a corps, nor was he regarded as daring or brilliant, but Meade had only four major generals from which to choose as a replacement. These were Newton, Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday (who had done a good job on July 1 as the acting commander of First Corps), Maj. Gen. David Birney (who had just received his commission the previous month), and Maj. Gen. Carl Schurz, a political appointee without extensive military education or experience. Schurz was out of the question for an Old Army man like Meade, who disdained political generals—especially from the Eleventh Corps. Birney had been too recently promoted. Of the two remaining candidates, Meade preferred Newton to Doubleday, who actually outranked Newton by date of commission, but in whom Meade had little confidence. The First Corps men themselves, however, who had witnessed Doubleday's skill and courage in the desperate afternoon hours of July 1 after

the announcement of Newton's promotion. They felt that Doubleday, a true "First Corps man," deserved to command the corps.

In appearance, said Lt. Frank Haskell, Brig. Gen. John Gibbon's aide-de-camp, Newton was "a well-sized, shapely, muscular, well dressed man, with brown hair, with a very ruddy, clean-shaved, full face, blue eyes, blunt, round features, [who] walks very erect, curbs in his chin, and has somewhat of that smart sort of swagger, that people are apt to suppose characterizes soldiers." If Newton lacked Reynolds' military flair, he was considered competent by most of his fellow officers. Even Col. Charles Wainwright, Newton's new chief of artillery, who thought him "intensely lazy" and a lover of creature comforts when compared to the Spartan Reynolds, admitted that Newton was intelligent and competent. In 1842, he had graduated 2nd in a class of 56 at West Point and was assigned to the Engineers. His pre-war service included routine engineering duties, a stint as an instructor at the Academy, and the post of chief engineer on the 1858 expedition against the Mormons.

Although he began the war as an engineer, Newton was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers in the fall of 1861 and stationed with his brigade in Washington D.C., where he helped design the defenses until March 1862. With his brigade on the Peninsula in Maj. Gen. William B. Franklin's Sixth Corps, Newton led his men in action for the first time at Gaines' Mill, where he performed well in heavy fighting, and at Malvern Hill. He was praised for his actions at both engagements by his division commander, Brig. Gen. Henry Slocum.

In September 1862, after the fighting at Crampton's Gap on South Mountain, where his troops helped to overwhelm the Rebel defenders, Newton was recommended by Franklin for a promotion to major general "for his conspicuous gallantry and important services during the entire engagement." A few days later at the climactic Battle of Antietam, Newton's corps was held out of the action in a reserve position. Newton's Crampton's Gap performance, however, was still fresh in Franklin's mind when, in mid-October,

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